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ABSTRACT

Faculty unions have become a reality on many college campuses. This paper examines some of the objections of the public and college administrators toward faculty unions. Public criticism usually centers on the possible increased costs of education generated by union demands, while the college management complains that union grievance and other procedures are time consuming; union demands ignore financial budgets; and union insistence on seniority over merit in hiring and promotion discourages managerial decisions by the administration. Nonunion members argue that unions are unprofessional organizations and could ruin the quality of education. Union members criticize the slowness of change within the union structure and the need for uniformity at the expense of the individual. The nature of the union leadership and the political structure of the union are controversial subjects causing intensive debate over the question of whether the faculty union is democratic or oligarchical in nature. Finally, the varying influence of union goals and faculty norms on the unions is discussed. (JMF)

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Faculty Unions: Criticism and Structure

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

Faculty unions in higher education have increased dramatically since the early 1960's, bringing with that move to academic collective bargaining representation a dramatic increase in criticism--from both outside and inside the academic world. Proponents of this representation proclaim that a faculty union is the first step towards faculty self-government. Those opposed--the most vehement often being some of the faculty union members themselves--reject that claim, offering specific examples to substantiate their counter-arguments.

One major point, however, must be faced by the public, by college and university managements, by faculty members against unions and by faculty members for unions. Faculty unions are real. On campuses where they exist, their legality is ascertained by some variation of college bargaining agreement (hereafter CBA), binding the parties concerned--management, faculty

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union members, and faculty non-union members to comply with mutually accepted articles and clauses. And campuses not involved now may be involved later. The concern for faculty members to share in the decision-making and development of their institutions is growing not waning.

The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the aforementioned criticism hoping to piece together some semblance of what a union is and is not. To complete this exploration, the following major questions will be dealt with:

1. Briefly what might be some of the objections the public might have towards faculty unions?
2. What are the major complaints of college managements toward faculty unions?
3. What are the primary arguments offered by faculty members not wishing to belong to faculty unions?
4. What criticisms do union members have of their own faculty unions?
5. Are faculty unions democratic or oligarchial in nature?
6. Which has more of an influence on faculty unions--union goals or faculty norms?

II. PUBLIC CRITICISM OF FACULTY UNIONS

Unlike a public elementary or secondary school, a college or university campus seemingly would not be affected by private citizens, but nothing could be less true. There is a connection albeit may be subtle. In short, the relationship is one based upon public opinion, and if it is negative, the effect may indirectly influence legislative appropriations for state institutions and donations for private colleges and universities.

Thus, a faculty union may be affected similarly by adverse public opinion. To most people, a union of any type is associated with an organized effort to secure better working conditions and especially salaries for its members. And to the public, an academic union means the same: higher wages for professors.

There are three times when college or university faculty union can expect to be criticized by members of the public:

1. When any media carries notice of the efforts to organize.
2. When a media covers contract renewal negotiations.
3. When that union--or even a public school union--goes on strike.

And this last example should be emphasized. Any group of teachers striking, and granted there are quite a few at certain times of the year, may cause citizens to believe educators in general are a greedy bunch.

Likewise, demands for more money by any unionized or ununionized group does not make private citizens happy in these inflationary times. A higher education union asking for--among other requests--increased salaries upsets the general public. When state colleges and universities request more money to cover salary demands and other expenses, private citizens feel their taxes will go up. When similar conditions are presented by private schools via the media, private citizens should not be as concerned, but in the back of their minds they may be thinking of the rising cost of a college education for children or grandchildren.

One could expect people with children or grandchildren in college or about to go to college to oppose the efforts of faculty unions, but not if the parents or grandparents belong to unions themselves. However, because people belong to industrial unions does not mean they will be automatically supportive of higher education unions. There are several reasons. First, they have trouble identifying with academic union members. The jobs are too dissimilar, not to mention the hours--40 hours per week v. 17-20 at school for classes and office hours plus an indefinite number at home and/or in the library. The public usually omits the at-home-preparation hours. Second, if they hated their 8th grade math teacher or any teacher, that hatred may still discolor their feelings. Too

many Americans value the process of education for their children but not the people who teach their children.

III. THE MAJOR COMPLAINTS OF COLLEGE MANAGEMENTS AGAINST FACULTY UNIONS

To support the general complaint that the presence of faculty unions creates problems that managements would otherwise not have, college and university administrators might offer at least three major complaints against academic unions.

1. Providing faculty members with an explicit grievance process as well as other procedures which must be compiled with by administrators, managements resent wasting valuable time with chronic complainers and with procedures they consider unnecessary.

2. Working to secure increased benefits and better teaching conditions for their members, unions are accused of ignoring financial budgets.

3. Advocating the use of academic seniority over merit as a basis for retrenchment, faculty unions discourage effective managerial decisions by college and university executives.

Grievances and Other Procedures

An academic union guarantees its members--and non-members--certain clearly stated rights which protect them against capricious and arbitrary acts by management. The right to grieve is perhaps the foremost among such rights. Every faculty member has the right to file a grievance.

Naturally, colleges without collective bargaining representation may have an informal system, but a faculty union has a more definite and more accessable system. First, the union will have a grievance chairman, a faculty member who is somewhat knowledgeable about grievances in general. And usually, a grievance chairman is more assertive than other faculty members. In addition, if the faculty union is part of a state union or larger national union, the grievance chairman has access to the collective insight of other grievance chairmen. By setting up a conference phone call, he can gain information from

his counterpart on other campuses and legal advice from the state or national headquarters. (Most larger faculty unions hire at least one lawyer for legal advice.) Therefore, an aggressive grievance chairman can become a viable opponent for members of management.

A grievance is usually not simple. True, a CBA is full of copiously detailed articles, clauses, and sub-clauses, but generally the grievance cannot be instantly categorized as black or white. Therefore, management people should be careful not to render an instant decision rejecting a grievance. Even when the facts seem to indicate management will win, some effort should be made to settle the grievance on the local campus in such a way that it will promote good will and not create a retaliation movement.

But settling a grievance peacefully often requires many phone calls and several discussions with the grievant and the union officials. When grievances are just and involve conscientious faculty members, management people are glad to try to work out problems by phone and through meetings. However, some grievants may be chronic complainers who try to win their points largely by wearing their management opponents down.

Other parts of the CBA may require management to abide by procedures guaranteeing faculty representation. Management may consider these procedures lengthy or unnecessary. For example, if the CBA requires that a tenure committee be elected to review all applicants for tenure and to recommend some or all of the reviewed candidates to the college president, this process is long and detailed. An effective college president could delegate that same job to one or several management people and get the job done faster.

There are endless examples of the aforementioned, but union has negotiated to have such procedures included in the CBA to guarantee faculty members a fairer treatment. To management people who consider themselves fair evaluators,

the articles seem to necessitate an excessive waste of time, time which could be used to make the institution run more efficiently or to make it grow. To the faculty members concerned, however, the articles insure them of better representation.

Budgets

Managements are often frustrated by the way faculty unions seemingly ignore financial budgets. For state schools and for private institutions budgets are facts, and facts must be dealt with. Certain line items of a budget may be increased but only at the expense of another line item.

Faculty members by nature are usually not that impressed with the limiting effects of budgetary figures. Instead they look around them at the teaching facilities that other schools have and at the salary increases that others have gained. And concerning the latter, they too, like the aforementioned private citizens may have been influenced by the media realizing that other groups--coal miners, steel workers, and various other workers--have secured raises, causing inflation and necessitating that they gain salary increases to offset conditions caused by the inflationary spiral.

Except for tuition fees, schools are limited by appropriations granted by the legislators, and private schools are similarly limited by donations from private citizens, foundations, and companies. When available funds aren't forthcoming, the respective managements must say "no" to faculty demands. Such negative responses may often create negative reactions within the faculty ranks. Also, union leaders may oppose such statements because such actions make union leaders look bad or ineffective, which is worse.

Seniority v. Merit

In recent years, some college graduates have been unable to find jobs

as automatically as before. This trend has leveled or diminished enrollments at many American colleges and universities. And while enrollments are falling, tuitions are rising. Consequently, some institutions are finding too many professors in certain subject areas and not enough in other areas. Naturally, management people would like to make cutbacks and to hire in the needed areas, but faculty unions and the tenure system prevents that procedure.

At this point tenure does not seem as strong as it once was. Financial conditions will surely bring about retrenchment, and faculty unions have included retrenchment clauses in their CBA's, thereby weakening tenure more by making employment security dependent upon two factors:

1. A favorable departmental faculty-student ratio.
2. Seniority--assuming the other is unfavorable.

College managements would prefer to retrench people according to a procedure established by them and not by a purely mechanical process based upon seniority. College presidents and their respective vice-presidents of academic affairs realize that some faculty members contribute more to a school than others. Thus, they feel thwarted by the retrenchment procedures based upon seniority instead of merit.

IV. NON-UNION ARGUMENTS AGAINST UNIONS

Simplifying a great deal, faculty members who oppose faculty unions give two reasons for their actions:

1. Unions are unprofessional organizations.
2. Unions could ruin the quality of education.

Faculty members against unions are quite open about what they think of unions. Associating them with blue-collar workers, many refuse to take part in union activities or to sign a petition to get collective bargaining for their particular campuses.

A great portion of anti-faculty union professors base their arguments on the debatable issue that unions would lower education standards and, hence, the quality of teaching. Citing numerous firsthand or secondhand experiences relating to industrial unions protecting non-productivity and waste while at the same time always asking for more money, these educators feel they cannot in true professional consciousness join or sanction an organization which might sacrifice advancing a professional cause to gain a salary increase or something similar.

These two arguments are worth respect and consieration. The second one would be much stronger if on campuses having unions, the non-union faculty would refuse the wage increases gained through union negotiations. Also, if non-union members would donate a sum comparable to their dues to a fund to help their school, their second argument would be stronger.

Other professors may not belong to unions for other reasons. Some faculty members feel unions have ignored their concerns. Initial negotiations failed to secure protection for their vested rights. And other people have belonged to unions but have dropped their union memberships because their grievances did not turn out right. They blame the grievance chairman, the union leaders, the contract or the union as a whole or all of those named.

V. WHY UNION MEMBERS CRITICIZE THEIR OWN UNIONS

Members criticizing their own organization is healthy for several reasons. First, it is a way for members to participate. Second, it can be the first step in actions to change and to improve an organization, ultimately making it more valuable to members and thereby perpetuating the benefits of belonging.

However, offering criticism should imply a responsibility to participate. Faculty union members tend to criticize a lot, but too often they are not

apt to follow up their suggestions for improvements. That is to say many offer ideas for handling or eliminating a problem, but they are not ready to offer a step-by-step explanation of how to implement the procedure, and if they offer the procedural explanation, they often are not ready to help execute its implementation.

The explanation for such behavior is understandable. A faculty union is a bureaucratic structure, and a college or university campus is a quite different structure. For many it is a sanctuary, providing not only the freedom to express ideas but, unfortunately, the absence of an atmosphere to test their worth and durability. Consequently, such a sanctuary nurtures different expectations and behavior. That becomes even clearer with more analysis.

A bureaucratic structure has organizational goals, and college professors quickly notice practices which conflict with their own ideas. Certainly, an individual is capable of changing the direction of his organiztion, but his idea for change must benefit the organization. And in case of a faculty union, the benefit must not just involve one professor or a department but a large portion of the general membership. Further, the change must not be introduced at the expense of another professor, department, or union chapter.

Ronald Corwin's table "Points of Conflict Between Bureaucratic and Professional Values" illustrates the basis for dissension within faculty. Modifying Corwin's presentation but staying with the tone of his research, one readily sees that a faculty member may feel that his/her problem is unique but nevertheless should be solved by the union. On the other hand, the table shows that bureaucratic structures "stress uniformity."[1]

Looking at the table more, the second point worth noting is that

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[1]Thomas J. Sergiovanni and Fred D. Culver, The New School Executive: A Theory of Administration, (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 26.

academicians who think of themselves only as professionals would support merit differentials in status and rank.[2] In other words these people would feel that those who excel in an area should be paid more. That idea could be helpful to higher education. The problem is, however, that a great number of professors think of themselves as falling in the top ten percent of outstanding teachers at their respective schools. Arithmetically this is an impossibility, but logical analysis is not applied to such self-conceptions, and hence, the conflict between professional values and the organizational goals of the faculty union goes on.

Thus many criticisms of faculty unions reflect an inability or unwillingness to integrate themselves or to be integrated into the union by effective union leadership--or both.

VI. ARE FACULTY UNIONS DEMOCRATIC OR OLIGARCHICAL?

The nature of faculty union leadership and the political structure of faculty unions are controversial subjects causing intensive debates. Professors who advocate faculty unions assert that such an organiztion is a democratic coalition, uniting academic departments into an effective means of self-government. The formality of the union as noted in the CBA guarantees faculty members specific rights and procedures which must be honored by management. Having an organization which legally represents the faculty can voice to the management whatever ideas the majority of the professors agree upon in general union meetings. Every faculty member can voice his opinion on every subject or problem.

This concept of democracy is refuted by disgruntled union members. They vociferously claim it simply isn't true; instead of the organization being run

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[2] Ibid

by all of the faculty, they emphatically state that it is run by a select few--the clique. The following excerpt which looks closely at the membership of unions explains why faculty members themselves are often to blame for this oligarchical condition.

> The most active union members--the elected officers--are employees who have more energy and ambition than they can expend on their jobs. Essentially discontented and anxious to get ahead, they often turn to the union when their drives are frustrated elsewhere. Many of these persons may also be excellent workers, and management frequently finds that leadership in the union may provide a clue to supervisory ability.
>
> The active group, together with members who do not hold office but who attend union meetings and participate in the local's political life, is likely to include no more than 5 per cent of the membership, and frequently a good bit less. Most of the members prefer to "let George do it" when it comes to taking an active role. They pay their dues as they would pay premiums on an insurance policy, and they have little to do with the organization except when a grievance arises or when a strike takes place.[1]

Such a lack of membership activity is far from pure democracy, causing a faculty union to shift to an oligarchical structure in order to accomplish its goals. However, like any organization, a faculty union is a system which has the capacity to change. And an academic union which is oligarchical generally may shift towards democracy when a common crisis threatens the entire faculty. The transition will involve a lot of mispent energy, and the democratic activities may be awkward and may even lead to hasty and ill-founded solutions for problems.

Democratic decision-making done in haste or with excessive deliberation and almost total faculty involvement can be costly. Often good decisions must be made fast by union leaders. And in one sense that is not democracy. On the other hand, the union leaders are elected democratically so it isn't a case of pure oligarchy either.

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[1] George Strauss and Leonard R. Sayles, Personnel: The Human Problems of Management, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1972), pp. 102-3.

Still, few faculty members understand any diversion from pure democracy. The following, taken from a letter by faculty union member Jim Wilson, Indiana University, Indiana, Pa., to Martin Morand, Executive Director of Association of Pennsylvania State Colleges and University Faculties, concisely summarizes the need for union leaders to be given the authority to make decisions for faculty members.

> ...I think some college people are extremely naive about what it takes to make a union successful. A pure democracy is fine if you have six months to consider every decision that must be made. This is simply not the case in this type of work. I've been on enough college committees to know that in the end some one person has to do the work or nothing ever gets done, and sometimes decisions have to be made on the spur of the moment that may be right or wrong but they must be made.[2]

Faculty unions can be democratic or oligarchical. The organizational structure depends primarily on the attitudes and personal commitments of the faculty membership. This subject will be pursued further in the next section.

VII. WHICH HAS MORE OF AN INFLUENCE ON FACULTY UNIONS--UNION GOALS OR FACULTY NORMS?

The answer to that question would be the same for a top-notch, primarily democratic union and an apathetic union--faculty norms. If a highly democratic union were examined, the interaction necessary for democratic decision-making would transpire because such behavior was considered normative at that particular campus. The majority of faculty members would value unions, regarding them as an effective tool for academic self-government and consequently would take part belonging to various committees and performing certain tasks necessary to continually share with management in the progressive development of the college or university.

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[2]"Epistolary," APSCUF Newsletter, July 1976, p. 3.

On the other hand, if the majority of faculty members are hygenically geared--interested only in more money and personal benefits for themselves--the union would not have as much meaningful interactions as would be necessary for a democratic union. Energy would be used, but the interaction would be negative and cancerous, perpetuating general pessimism and institutional gloom. The debates would be heated, but the ideas would be after-the-fact rather than before-the-fact. The healthy productive interaction necessary to explore solutions for impedning problems would be lacking.

Any union leader or management executive must not write off the faculty union as being apathetic. He or she must provide opportunities for the healthy interaction in order to upgrade faculty norms. Both union leadership and management leadership should realize that the key to a healthy institution is a healthy, concerned, and participating faculty. To do otherwise is to accept a dying or failing institution.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Whether faculty unions are the best tool for effectively insuring the faculty a mutual and participating share of the decision-making process with a college or a university management quite frankly is debatable. That academic unions exist on many campuses is not. Members of management, faculty members--including non-union members and disgruntled union members--and the general public must realize that although faculty unions can generally be improved they will surely affect the institutional direction of those colleges and universities which have collective bargaining representation.